

Uncomfortable Climate

No one should have been surprised to see the Environmental Protection Agency battle over and then lose on the status of climate change. The Bush administration has produced more hot air and less action on the issue than on any other. News reports this week that it moved to suppress the EPA's latest assessment about the seriousness of climate change is merely a measure of its indebtedness to the fossil fuel industry.

Here is President Bush two years ago:

"My administration is committed to a leadership role on the issue of climate change. We recognize our responsibility, and we will meet it — at home, in our hemisphere and in the world."

Here is his departing EPA administrator, Christine Whitman, also in 2001:

"The Bush Administration considers global climate change to be one the greatest environmental challenges we face. Increasingly, there is little room for doubt that humans are affecting the Earth's climate, that the climate change we've seen during the past century is the result of human activity, and that we must continue our efforts to stop and reverse the growth in the emission of greenhouse gases."

According to the New York Times, the EPA had included a long section on the threats posed by climate change in a draft report on the state of the environment, but that officials at the White House first amended then whittled this part of the report "to a few noncommittal paragraphs." The EPA apparently did the best it could — when it couldn't print what the science supported, it chose to report almost nothing. Wouldn't it be wonderful if removing a climate change from the report also removed it from the environment?

The rhetoric recognizing the seriousness of climate change arrived as the Bush administration asked the National Academy of Science to review the work on the issue to see whether its risks had been exaggerated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The NAS concluded they were not, and climate change was caused at least in part by man-made pollution. Such a conclusion would have justified the president's campaign promise to "require all power plants to meet clean air standards in order to reduce emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, mercury and carbon dioxide within a reasonable period of time." He then dropped the carbon dioxide requirements once the oil and coal industries whined.

The EPA has been emboldened by the large majority of research on climate change, including research at the direction of the president himself, but Mr. Bush does not want to anger his supporters in oil and coal by taking the steps the environmental models show are needed to reduce the threat. The consequences of this standoff are, of course, potentially disastrous.

The Senate hopes in the next several weeks to finish its work on a major energy bill, for which there are several significant amendments to address climate change. If the administration cannot exercise its "leadership role" on this issue, as pledged, the public

should demand at least that it stay quiet as Congress attempts to act responsibly.